

How Adroit Are U.S. Mideast Peace Moves?

After a three-hour cabinet meeting in Jerusalem yesterday, Yitzhak Shamir was hanging tough on his threat to boycott temporarily the next round of Mideast peace talks. The Israeli prime minister was embarrassed when U.S. Secretary of State James Baker unilaterally set the next session for Washington day after tomorrow. There still is the possibility—even likelihood—of a compromise, but this U.S.-Israeli flare-up has left many people wondering what's going on.

What's going on is probably Baker-style gamesmanship designed to show the Arab side that the U.S. is evenhanded. But then it also is evident that the Bush administration wants to put more distance between it-

Global View

By George Melloan

self and Israel. State Department Arabists have been promoting such a move for years. Some American conservatives, many British Tories and anti-Zionists in continental Europe, Asia and Africa approve. George Bush himself was the most active Reagan administration critic of Israel, particularly its June 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Just before last month's first Mideast peace gathering in Madrid, he peremptorily postponed a \$10 billion loan guarantee to Israel.

His chief of staff, John Sununu, has a Lebanese background and close ties with Arab-American organizations. In an off-hand comment, he blamed the Jewish lobby last summer for raising a stink about his expensive travel habits. The political dangers in his remark so frightened the administration that he was ordered to call Jewish leaders and recant. Jim Baker himself sometimes doesn't bother to conceal his irritation with the Israelis.

None of this yet adds up to a U.S. sell-out of Israel or an end to the economic and military aid Israel has received from the

U.S. in 43 beleaguered years. When Israel came under Scud attack in the Gulf War, the Bush administration sent Patriot anti-missile batteries, although partly to keep Israel out of the war. Mr. Shamir, on his frequent trips to New York and Washington to shore up political support, usually insists that his troubles with the State Department and White House are only differences among friends. Most Israelis think the U.S. has a genuine desire to help Israel achieve peace with its Arab neighbors.

But a key question is whether Messrs. Baker and Bush have a sufficiently sophisticated grasp of Mideast political dynamics to be useful in this effort. Those dynamics involve Arab-Arab relationships just as importantly as Arab-Jewish differences.

The most interesting factor in the Arab-Arab equation is once again Jordan. King Hussein has deep problems of every possible description. His national economy is in shambles. As always, he has reason to fear Syrian or Palestine Liberation Organization treachery. He now has some 300,000 newly arrived Palestinians who have just been banished from Kuwait because of PLO collaboration with Saddam Hussein during the vicious Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. With more than half his population Palestinian, the king and his Hashemite followers have every reason to feel added discomfort. They also have in their midst the Muslim Brotherhood, influenced by the most radical of Iranian and Arab leaders, with a clear preference for trouble over peace.

King Hussein's relationship with the PLO has been an uneasy one for years. After the PLO twice had attempted to assassinate him, his army attacked its paramilitary units in 1970 to drive them out of Jordan. Syria, which along with the PLO was then a Soviet client, invaded Jordan in support of the PLO. The U.S., in a counterstroke on King Hussein's behalf, urged Israel to mobilize and threaten Syria and this persuaded the Syrians to withdraw

their tanks. In other words, Israel helped save King Hussein from the combined forces of a Soviet-backed Syria and PLO.

The king's more recent decision to make common cause with the PLO and Saddam during Desert Storm was most likely a marriage of necessity, brought about by the king's own relative weakness, rather than a mark of any newfound trust for either Saddam or Yasser Arafat. But after Syria cleverly chose the winning side, the king suddenly found himself without reliable allies. As a reward for Syria's token role in the war, the Saudis and Gulf emirates sent large sums to Syrian dictator Ha-

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fez Assad and he is busily spending that money on new, more potent weapons. Assad now wants to be top gun in the region, and that probably means still more trouble for King Hussein.

For all these reasons, it is no accident that King Hussein has been the most eager Arab respondent to the U.S. peace initiative. He was the first to answer the call to come to Washington.

Which raises an interesting question: Does King Hussein now see a greater safety in cooperating with the U.S. and Israel on the Palestinian question than in trying to appease Arab radicals? Putting it another way: In return for peace, could the U.S. and Israel pull King Hussein's chestnuts out of the fire once more? Certainly that possibility exists. Most of the Mideast's Palestinians live in Jordan or on the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Israel, Jordan and Palestinian moderates all have

good reasons to work together in establishing a Palestinian homeland, possibly under the joint protection of Israel, Jordan and the U.S. With U.S. protection, the king could preserve his Hashemite kingdom and perhaps even move it toward democracy. Because the Soviet Union's influence has become negligible, the U.S. has a unique opportunity.

But it is by no means certain that the Bush administration has learned any lessons from its past failures in the Mideast. It tried to humiliate Saddam and got a war in exchange. It listened to the Saudis and missed its chance to put Saddam Hussein out of business for good; U.S. threats and U.N. inspection teams to the contrary, he probably will make a comeback some day, possibly brandishing a nuclear weapon this time.

Now the administration appears to be investing an inordinate amount of political capital in Assad, who is even less trustworthy than Saddam. The Syrian takeover of Lebanon was countenanced and its role in international terrorism has a new coat of whitewash. As a further concession, Secretary Baker is hinting at return of the Golan Heights, a strategic position that Israel insists on retaining.

Certainly it has occurred to Syria and the PLO that King Hussein might be tempted to make a separate peace. They huddled in Damascus to talk about that possibility before Syria agreed to this week's meeting.

The U.S. has denied visas to any direct representatives of the PLO because of last year's attack on an Israeli beach by PLO terrorists. But the PLO, in collusion with Syria, is trying to maintain control over the Palestinian delegates to the talks.

Gamesmanship against Israel is fairly easy. The question now is whether Jim Baker is shrewd enough to best two masters of the art, Assad and Arafat. Results so far are unpromising, as are the prospects for peace in the Middle East.